

Sofía Becerra-Licha. An Exploratory Study of Minimal Processing Practices for Sound Recordings: MPLP and the Audiovisual Archive. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. August, 2012. 36 pages. Advisor: Jacqueline Dean.

This exploratory study examined archival processing practices for sound recordings; primarily how and whether the practice of minimal processing termed “More Product Less Process” (“MPLP”) can be applied to audiovisual holdings. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen professionals representing eleven significant audiovisual archives throughout the United States. Participants were asked to share their perceptions of minimal processing, to self-identify where their own processing practice falls along the minimal-maximal spectrum, to explain what factors go into their methodological choices, and to discuss the role or response of their users. Participants expressed an appreciation for the need to get collections out for use as quickly and efficiently as possible, but expressed concern over whether this was possible within a minimalistic framework. Nearly half of all respondents described their institution’s approach as trending towards the maximalist end of the spectrum, while acknowledging that priorities and descriptive levels were ultimately largely collection and context dependent.

#### Headings:

Audiovisual archives

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MINIMAL PROCESSING PRACTICES FOR  
SOUND RECORDINGS: MPLP AND THE AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVE

by  
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## **Introduction:**

### **1.1 Problem definition**

This exploratory study aimed to briefly examine archival processing practices and standards for sound recordings. Namely, how and whether the practice of minimal processing termed “More Product Less Process” – or “MPLP” – has any relevance for addressing backlogs within this subset of special collections. MPLP was first conceptualized in Greene & Meissner’s seminal 2005 article “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing.” As a result of their study, the authors contended that “archivists spend too much time on tasks that do not need doing, or at least don’t need doing all the time,” thus “squander[ing] scarce resources” (p. 209) and contributing to an overwhelming processing backlog in archives nationwide. MPLP instead advocated a “Golden Minimum” for archival processing that emphasized maximum access over exhaustive description (p. 240). The basic notions underlying MPLP are that it:

- 1) “expedites getting collection materials into the hands of users;
- 2) assures arrangement of materials adequate to user needs;
- 3) takes the minimal steps necessary to physically preserve collection materials;

and

4) describes materials sufficient to promote use” (pp. 212-213)

The impact of MPLP on the archival community has been significant, on both ends of the spectrum. For many, it was a welcome acknowledgment and legitimization of the limitations faced by archivists in the field, given the mismatch between resources and materials to be processed.

Critics, on the other hand, have found fault with some of Greene and Meissner’s data, analysis, and assumptions. Concerns raised include questioning the broad applicability of the model in more diverse archival settings, as well as whether backlogs are even “exclusively a processing problem” (Van Ness, 2010, p. 131; see also Prom, 2010, p. 146). Follow-up studies have also pointed to the unrealistic level of technical support presumed by the MPLP model, as well as suggesting that Greene and Meissner’s processing times need to be reevaluated.

One area of application that remains largely unexamined is the impact (if any) of MPLP on more specialized areas of the archival profession. One such archival subgenre is audiovisual archives, an umbrella term which includes sound recordings, which will be the focus of the exploratory study to follow, with special consideration for musical recordings.

For archivists, sound records introduce a variety of complications to the already complex negotiation between archival standards and practice. Paton (1990), among others, notes there has traditionally been a troubling divide between “paper” and “sound” archives (p. 274) and that furthermore, when it comes to sound records, “The silence of the archival community on the subject is deafening” (p. 275). A cursory survey of the literature reveals concurrent and subsequent attempts at tackling the lack of protocol and

standards for sound records administration via symposia, round-tables, and manuals (Casey & Gordon, 2007; Fells, Donachy, & Owen, 2002; Jaszi & Lewis, 2006; Smith, Allen, & Allen, 2004). Nevertheless, the general consensus is tinged with a note of urgency with regard to finding sustainable solutions.

To a certain degree, many of the concerns faced by audio archivists mirror those of archivists contending with digital media. In both cases, the risk is two-pronged: “loss, damage, or destruction of the physical item, and also loss of access to the content of the recording, the information content” (Lewis, 2004, p. 61). Moreover, the appraisal and description of sound recordings requires different considerations of time, approach, and training on the part of archivists. It is impossible to visually skim materials, repeatedly playing degrades original tapes and discs, and ultimately one has to decide whether the sound itself is what is worth preserving, or if there are other ways of conserving and making accessible the same information. Similar to electronic documents and resources, decisions must be made as to whether migration or emulation is more cost-effective, given the specialized equipment necessary to accommodate now-defunct formats.

In addition to issues of preservation and access, description poses another set of challenges, as does the diversity of institutional contexts within which sound archives may be found. Despite repeated efforts, music cataloging has historically been marked by a highly localized approach to describing sound recordings (Bradley, 2003, p. 417). Cataloging in general is plagued by competing demands for greater user access alongside increased productivity, with little guidance on how to achieve either aim (Hoffman, 2009, p. 632).

Given the aforementioned lack of scholarly or practical consensus on minimal processing standards, and specifically the application of More Product Less Process to the audiovisual realm, this qualitative and exploratory study of the state of the field was conducted via a series of interviews conducted with thirteen archivists representing eleven audiovisual archives in the United States. It is tentatively hoped that the results produced will shed light on trends and avenues for further research, including studies on a larger scale and employing quantitative methodologies as well.

In short, Greene and Meissner's (2005) groundbreaking work ignited a largely productive – if at times contentious – debate that is slowly being expanded to include non-paper media, but has yet to coalesce around a particular study or set of evidence or even tentative best practices. As archivists and the general public alike come to grips with the increasing information overload of the information age, as well as the predicted loss of a significant portion of the nation's audiovisual heritage to physical deterioration and technological obsolescence, it is of vital importance that evidence-based processing standards evolve in response to these challenges. In establishing a snapshot of the professional assessments and practice of audiovisual archivists as they consider the relevance of More Product Less Process for their media, or chart alternate approaches to minimal processing, this brief study aims to provide sound archivists and those who use their holdings with some ethnographic data for their consideration.

## 1.2 Research questions

The following research questions undergirded this study:

- **What has been the impact and/or application of the MPLP model on the processes used by audiovisual archivists?** Is this model relevant for audiovisual archivists?
- **What does minimal processing look like for sound recordings versus paper-based archives?** How do audiovisual archivists differentiate between minimal and maximum level approaches? Is there consistency across repositories?
- **What disciplines, theories, or other influences have informed audiovisual archivists' current practices?** How satisfied are they with their current processing workflow?

## Literature Review

### 1.3 Introduction

As indicated in the preceding introduction and problem definition, More Product Less Process (MPLP) is a compelling model for addressing backlogs of unprocessed materials, but it is not without its detractors. Moreover, both unpublished and commercially published sound recordings present additional considerations with regard to preservation and description. Both are significant issues meriting more in depth analysis than is possible given the scope of this specific study, but a brief overview is nonetheless relevant to the discussion at hand. This literature review will proceed as



follows: first, a brief summary of the MPLP tenets and specific scholarly and professional concerns brought against Greene and Meissner's (2005) study, then a more general discussion of music preservation and description in the professional literature.

#### **1.4 MPLP: In brief**

Greene and Meissner's 2005 findings were based on a study that included a rigorous literature review, a close examination of the processing grant applications records of the National Historical Publications and Records Commissions, an online survey of a hundred archival repositories, a user survey drawing from two large internet repositories and a virtual discussion group, and other related studies completed in the last ten years (p. 209). The authors' hypothesis was that archivists were focusing too much of their time on details with disproportionately little impact on user access and that such an approach was untenable in light of the immense backlog faced by archival repositories (Greene & Meissner, 2005, p. 209)

Greene and Meissner's analysis concluded that "archivists spend too much time on tasks that do not need doing, or at least don't need doing all the time," thus "squander[ing] scarce resources" (p. 209) and that the nation-wide backlog epidemic bore a direct correlation to this approach. Upon analyzing the results of their study, the authors put forth their response in the form of the motto "More Product, Less Process" as a guiding force for maximizing access to materials even if it had to come at the expense of meticulously completed description (p. 240). Rather than aiming for comprehensiveness, MPLP's ideal is a "Golden Minimum" that prioritizes making collections accessible as quickly as possible while taking the minimal number of steps in order to arrange,

preserve, and describe materials at a level adequate for patron needs (pp. 212-213).

Lauded by some, lambasted by others, Greene and Meissner's model has stirred up intense debate in the archival community.

## **1.5 MPLP: Critical response**

Common criticisms of MPLP include: taking issue with the correlation made between processing backlogs and technique; the fact that the study sample was comprised nearly entirely of repositories at colleges and universities; and questioning whether MPLP is truly a new concept. Van Ness (2010) in particular goes as far to assert that MPLP does not represent a significant paradigm shift because it mistakenly assumes that the vast majority of archives are doing the kind of over-processing bemoaned by Greene and Meissner (p. 138). Instead, Van Ness (2010) contends that MPLP has been "standard practice" at own workplace since the 1980s, and that what Greene and Meissner describe was confined to "old school" archives (p. 130).

With regard to methodology, Prom (2010) also posits that some of Greene and Meissner's data is dated (p. 151) and does not account for electronic records (p. 150). Overall, Prom's (2010) "analysis shows that paper-based processing backlogs are not correlated to the application of intensive processing techniques and that they are only mildly correlated to the application of complex descriptive technologies" (p. 146). Prom's (2010) investigation is based on a subset of the original data and his primary claim is that Greene and Meissner failed to differentiate between factors that create processing backlogs (p. 154). Thus, external factors were not sufficiently taken into

consideration (p. 157) and in actuality the issue is management, not processing (p. 158).

As he writes,

A repository's entire range of archival activities needs to be constantly audited and adjusted. In many cases, it will make more sense to change appraisal and reference practices, address personnel issues, or improve descriptive workflows before implementing "processing lite." The Greene/Meissner techniques will likely have a significant effect in eliminating backlogs only in institutions that are well managed in other respects. (Prom, 2010, p. 159)

Van Ness (2010) is also in agreement that "the survey was poorly conceived and poorly executed" and that in particular, "Greene and Meissner did not analyze other interesting and useful data in the survey; data that indicate alternative explanations for the backlog problem" (Van Ness, 2010, p. 137).

In addition to data analysis, another common criticism of Greene and Meissner's MPLP solution lies in the participant sample, which was arguably skewed heavily toward repositories housed at academic institutions. Van Ness (2010) in particular asserts that surveying the membership of the Society of American Archivists is inherently problematic because academic archivists are overrepresented within this population (p. 132) while institutional archives are essentially absent (p. 133).

It is Van Ness' (2010) contention that the reality of manuscript repositories is quite different from that faced by institutional archives; they are especially diverse in holdings and their processing staff is generally too small to take on MPLP as a sustainable practice (Van Ness, 2010, p. 137). These factors thus beg the question of whether MPLP is applicable to other manuscript repositories. Van Ness' (2010) other criticisms include that the survey was too long (p. 133); the questions were imprecise (p. 134); and the statistics were reported carelessly (p. 136). In addition, the Van Ness (2010)

contests Greene and Meissner's assertion that under MPLP, processing 400 cubic foot a year is an attainable goal without having professional archivists processing exclusively for seven to eight hours a day.

A related point of debate is how cost savings are measured and whether MPLP actually reduces costs or merely transfers them to other units, such as reference services (Van Ness, 2010, p. 140). Moreover, the author cautions that since processing staff is largely comprised of paraprofessional and student labor, switching these workers to more sophisticated processing tasks will not necessarily save time in the long-term (Van Ness, 2010, p. 138-139). That is,

Institutions that rely heavily on student labor will inevitably take far longer to process collections, but it cannot be assumed that the processing costs will be higher than those of an institution where the work is done by a professional or paraprofessional in a shorter period of time. (Van Ness 2010: p. 139)

In short, it is Van Ness' (2010) conviction that Greene and Meissner's recommendations presume a privileged level of technical support not found in all repositories and thus their findings are not generalizable to the degree they are presented (p. 139).

Minimal processing does incur costs, of space and materials (Van Ness, 2010, p. 141) and it could be argued that providing access to more materials has the potential to lead to increased reference requests. As put forth most bluntly by Van Ness (2010) in a follow-up rebuttal to Greene and Meissner (2005): "More collections, more patrons. More access, more patrons. More patrons, less time to process. The math is both simple and cruel, and it doesn't require a grant to support it" (Letter to the Editor, *American Archivist*, 73:2, p. 414).

Even if the quibbling scholars and practitioners quoted here remain unconvinced of a singular solution, the inefficient practices condemned by Greene and Meissner (2005) are clearly symptomatic of much larger issues yet to be resolved (Prom, 2010, Letter to the Editor, *American Archivist*, 73:2, p. 419), with Van Ness (2010) concluding that:

For the academic library to erase its backlog of historical records, it must do more than streamline its processing procedures. It will have to reverse the current two-to-one ratio of faculty to paraprofessionals and give more attention to the nuts and bolts of processing. It will also have to reduce the personalized reference service to which our researchers are accustomed, limit bibliographic instruction, spend less time doing exhibits, and cut down on outreach activities and fund-raising. (p. 145)

As significant as MPLP has been for general archival practice, it has been slower to permeate the non-paper records realm, which is understandable given the wealth of discussion engendered by the scope originally considered by Greene and Meissner (2005). As will soon become evident, sound records add another layer of complexity to considerations of resources, workflow, and descriptive needs.

## **1.6 Audiovisual concerns: Preservation & description**

From a purely descriptive standpoint, sound records present a variety of challenges to archivists, and in particular catalogers. Writing on the history of music cataloging, Bradley (2003) affirms that “Although there has been a consistent effort to make records accessible to their users in such a way that their full potential will be realized, there has been little agreement about how best to accomplish this” (p. 477). Speaking more generally, Hoffman (2009) even goes as far as to insist repeatedly that “cataloging research is not focused on users,” primarily because “Cataloging standards claim to focus

on users but are not based on an understanding of users' needs that originates from empirical studies of real users" (p. 634). Hoffman's (2009) own dissertation research also implies that

Instead, catalogers in practice have been given the responsibility to meet users' needs and are told to customize bibliographic records. Dissertation research by Hoffman, however, suggests that catalogers have a limited ability to customize bibliographic records, because catalogers do not know who their users are, cannot identify their needs, and believe that following standards meet users' needs. Library administrators also discourage catalogers from customizing bibliographic records to increase productivity and efficiency. (p. 632)

Faced with minimal guidance, and despite attempts at collaborative initiatives, music cataloging in particular remains largely the purview of individual practice and institutional standards, particularly for older formats no longer in common use.

Describing sound records, both published and unpublished, has long presented a variety of difficulties for librarians and archivists. Bradley (2003) demonstrates that, "historically, music cataloging has been an ample and challenging field for the want of rules applicable to the special problems of music and for the want of adequate bibliographies and thematic catalogues for ready identification" and thus far libraries have "worked out local solutions to cataloguing problems" (p. 472) largely as individual entities. MacLeod and Lloyd's 1994 study of 358 libraries found that 77% reported having a backlog of uncataloged scores and sound recordings and that "These backlogs grew primarily as a result of large acquisitions and gifts without corresponding staff to process them. Respondents also cited lack of knowledgeable staff as a deterrent to the reduction and elimination of the backlog" (p. 7).

This localization is beginning to change, however, as individual repositories put forth their best practices for wider dissemination. One such example is Mudge and Hoek's (2000) summary of their institution's approach to describing jazz 78 rpm recordings. Even they are forced to point out, however, that

Since other sound recording formats are much more common today, cataloging rules generally offer little guidance for describing and providing access to 78 rpm discs. As a result, institutions have developed their own strategies for dealing with 78s. These solutions, though perhaps adequate for each individual institution, in some cases involve minimal-level description and less than rigorous name-authority control, therefore limiting the usefulness of such bibliographic records in a cooperative environment. (Mudge & Hoek, 2000, p. 22)

While cataloging and other forms of description present a formidable challenge to caretakers of music archives, this is but one aspect to be considered with regard to minimal processing.

Generally speaking, sound archives are resource-intensive to develop and maintain: from specialized playback equipment, specialized training, to expensive materials, one thing scholars and practitioners can agree on is that established practices for paper archives are not entirely equivalent and that better articulated standards are urgently needed for these machine-readable formats which "cannot be 'scanned' or skimmed quickly by sight alone" at the point of accessioning, processing, or continued use (Paton, 1990, p. 276). In addition,

Making user and preservation copies of recordings, especially those originally made on obsolete or nonstandard equipment, is considerably more difficult, time-consuming and expensive than photocopying aging paper documents, a remedy with which paper archivists are usually familiar. (Paton, 1990, p. 276)

Several large-scale reports have been published in recent years (Jaszi & Lewis, 2006; Casey & Gordon, 2007; Bamberger & Brylawski, 2010) that focus on the pressing need to document and standardize best practices for audio preservation, but these have largely focused on technological and preservation concerns over prescriptions for description. Thus, much work remains to be done.

## **1.7 Preliminary conclusions**

Although the jury is still out on the impact of MPLP and its implication for a broader range of archival contexts, it is evident from the preceding discussion that this is a model that has sparked spirited, thoughtful, and evidence-based debates on the nature of minimal processing. What is less clear is where to go from here. As Prom (2010) aptly notes,

We must thoughtfully implement programs to speed processing and reduce backlogs, but we should not place excessive hope in any one solution, because many factors work together to determine the overall effectiveness of an archival program. (p. 169)

Additional recommendations include developing minimal arrangement and processing strategies that are more accessible and applicable to “lone arrangers” (Prom, 2010, pp. 66-68) and also “invest[ing] more time and resources in developing descriptive workflows and tools tailored to the need for efficient processing and description” (Prom, 2010, pp. 168). What remains to be seen is what comes of this discussion and how audiovisual repositories large and small may benefit from the results.

Because so little has been written about the topic, this literature review has aimed to provide a glimpse into the intellectual context within which sound archives operate,



while recognizing that “an archivist seeking broadly informative writings on recorded sound will search in vain” (Paton, 1990, p. 275) and thus the body of existing literature is slim. Therefore, this exploratory study cannot purport to tackle these questions on a truly comprehensive or definitive scale, but it is hoped that it will provide a localized snapshot into the state of minimal processing for sound recordings repositories and as such provide some measure of useful data for examining the context and factors faced by current practitioners charged with overseeing significant audiovisual collections in the United States.

## **Methods**

Given the lack of published scholarship and the many current unknowns with regard to the applicability of MPLP to audiovisual archiving, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for this initial study. Twelve U.S.-based sound archives were selected for inclusion, with an email solicitation going to each respective director as a prospective participant. Of the twelve repositories targeted, eleven agreed to participate in this study. In two cases, the director or curator redirected the interview request to the individual or individuals more directly involved with processing work, which led to a total of thirteen individual participants, as two of the eleven participating institutions had double representation.

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately thirty minutes were conducted via a combination of means, depending on respondents’ preferences: one in-person, two via email, and nine phone interviews were collected and transcribed (when applicable)

for review. The primary purpose of these interviews was to discuss participants' perceptions of the concept of minimal processing, for participants to self-identify where their own practice falls along spectrum (between minimal and maximum processing), what factors go into their methodological choices, and the role or response of their users.

Semi-structured interviews were preferred for the flexibility they offer in gathering information and clarifying queries in real time. For instance, due to the relative newness of the MPLP concept, it was presumed that it might be an unfamiliar term to current practitioners even if they were likely implementing elements of it in their daily practice. While these individuals were initially contacted via email, it was felt that a phone conversation would more likely yield a better response rate and more meaningful data than email surveys. Ultimately, however, the choice of medium was up to participants, and all were provided with the question areas in advance.

Of the eleven repositories surveyed, ten were housed in a university setting. This emphasis was deliberate. While sound recording archives can take a variety of institutional forms, "Many sound archives care almost exclusively for commercial recordings; they are often connected more closely with libraries than with manuscript repositories" (Paton, 1990, p. 276). For this reason, sound archivists are "more likely to belong to professional organizations relating to libraries, to their subject specialties, or to the technical aspects of their jobs than to archival groups oriented towards preservation, retrieval, and use of manuscript or paper records" (Paton, 1990, p. 276). Given this information, related professional organizations such as the Music Library Association, the Association for Recorded Sound, the American Folklore Society, and the Society for

Ethnomusicology were consulted in order to produce a preliminary list of significant sound archives in the United States for inclusion in this study.

Unfortunately, however, these resources were surprisingly limited. The final list of institutions and individuals was thus chosen via a combination of selections from lists curated by the Society for Ethnomusicology and the American Folklore Society, as well as snowball sampling; both were done in consultation with a local professional before finalizing the contact list. As described by Wildemuth (2009), “With snowball sampling, you first identify a few eligible members of your sample. Then you ask each participant for suggestions for additional people who meet your inclusion and exclusion criteria” (p. 121). It is understood that this method most likely not yield a representative sample (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 121), but snowball sampling nonetheless appeared to be the most productive approach here, as it was believed that “eligible members of the sample will be particularly difficult to identify” by other means (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 121).

Participants were asked if they would like a summary of the results at the conclusion of the study, but no other compensation was offered and it was presumed there should be no cost to participants other than time. Potential ethical risks were also anticipated to be minimal, as subjects did not disclose directly personal information and responses were anonymized, including excluding responses that have the potential to identify a repository or participant.

Some recognized disadvantages of this methodology include the small sample size and the biases inherent to qualitative research. At the same time, significant advantages of this approach include the potential of rich description leading to the identification of key terms and issues for larger-scale quantitative research that builds on

this exploratory study. As an exploratory endeavor, this research aimed “to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 16). This does not, however, preclude further quantitative and larger-scale studies based on these exploratory findings.

## **Results**

### **1.8 Demographic information**

The eleven archives participating in this study were distributed throughout the United States: three on the East coast, two from the Southeast, three in the Midwest, and three were located on the West coast. With the exception of two repositories with a staff of twelve to nineteen, curatorial staff hovered around two to four, making these fairly small operations. Collections ranged from 11,000 plus items to over two million, with an average of approximately 385,800 items. The participating archives were established as early as the 1920s to as recent as the 1990s and housed diverse collections, including the following formats: Beta, 8 track tape, DAT, lacquer discs, VHS, cylinders, 78 rpm discs, 45 rpm discs, reel to reel tape, wire recordings, 33 rpm discs, digital files, 8mm film, 16mm film, DVD, Hi-8 videotape, U-matic videotape, open reel tapes, aluminum discs, audio cassette tape, mini DV videotape, microcassettes, and phonodisc.

## 1.9 Responses to MPLP and minimal processing

All but two of the thirteen individuals surveyed indicated familiarity with MPLP, although in both cases the respondents demonstrated a basic understanding that it related to minimal processing. In three institutions, MPLP was at the foreground of current efforts, including one where staff members had attended special workshops, and another where MPLP was currently serving as the model for a university-wide initiative to improve technical services. In general, respondents agreed with the spirit of MPLP, but expressed varying degrees of reservations regarding the applicability of its specific tenets to the processing of audiovisual materials.

When asked whether MPLP was applicable to sound recordings, two individuals disagreed outright, with the remainder responding in the affirmative, but with carefully considered caveats. On the one hand, “We get a large amount of materials, a far greater amount than we have the staff resources to deal with. So this fits in very well with the reality of what things are here.” On the other hand, another common concern was intellectual control and access, or that “sound recordings really need to be described in order for people to be able to use them.” While collection-level description was generally accepted as a stop-gap acceptable minimum, five of the thirteen participants considered that minimally processing audiovisual materials would still entail item-level description.

Moreover, even in these cases it was generally presumed that these skeletal records would be revisited at a later date, which was acknowledged as a departure from MPLP’s core prescriptions. Echoing a common sentiment, another respondent opined that

if we were doing a standard paper collection, according to the More Product, Less Process approach that we would do it once, that that would be it. Whereas with sound recordings, in general I would say that

we would probably do the quick and dirty first, but hope to update it and expand on it later on.

That being said, however, participants stressed that a host of factors go into prioritizing collections and establishing the level of description each will receive, based on perceived research value, the particular needs of the repository's patron base, and in some cases, technology and space concerns, such as the processing requirements of off-site storage facilities, or the metadata needed for preservation services. In other words, for the most part, the point of departure is that "each collection is evaluated in terms of research value to it, in terms of to what level it really needs to be described."

Another important distinction that emerged was differentiating between commercial versus archival recordings with regard to appropriately minimal levels of description. As one participant put it, "it's harder to expose the information about ethnographic field recordings in a quick and dirty way," while by contrast, "With commercial records, we can do an inventory and put those up."

As part of the interview, respondents were asked to self-identify where their repository's processing approach fell along the maximal to minimum spectrum. Responses were split, with four repositories indicating a maximalist approach, another four indicating a minimalist approach, and two respondents indicating an approach somewhere in the middle or ad hoc. Regardless of where they stood, all participants stressed that the level of processing was highly dependent on the collection itself. As one participant put it, "I would say that MPLP informs everything we do, but we don't use minimum level processing for everything. But we use it where we can. It's hard to answer that, but I think it's all over the place."

Individuals were also asked to describe their current processing workflows, which revealed a diversity of approaches largely dependent on institutional structure and setting, staff size and organization, the primary patron base, preservation practices, and physical space constraints. When asked to reflect on whether these processes had changed, the most common observation was that “we get more materials and we have far fewer bodies. . . so sometimes we have to be more selective in what we maximally process just because we don’t have enough bodies to do it.”

In addition, participants were asked to reflect on where they would make cuts, as well as what would receive more resources given the opportunity, and all indicated already being stretched quite thin in terms of manpower while being faced with an ever-larger amount of materials coming in. While only two individuals went as far as to say further cuts might entail not accepting more collections, the general sentiment was to either cut student labor or to describe more at the collection level. However, as one respondent put it,

But I’d hate it. Because the thing is that if you did that, I guess the theory with ‘processing light’ is that if you process it to a certain degree the cream will rise to the top. But that’s always *if* people can find it. So that’s the part that gives me concern.

Given a scenario with more resources to dedicate to processing, a third of those surveyed would spend more on description, including targeting backlogs, retrospective cataloging, and, in one case, mass digitization.

Overall, respondents indicated a general familiarity and appreciation for the overall concept of MPLP, the main concern being whether audiovisual materials could be appropriately served without item-level description. In other words, “In some particulars,

specifically the interest in not going beyond series level for doing description and all that, I think it becomes a little more of a complicated question when we work with archival sound recording collections.” Several respondents, however, made the point that the application of MPLP to audiovisual records should be less about the specifics and more about the mindset and planning.

For instance, “we can’t OCR sound recordings at this point, so we must continue to describe selected recordings at the item level. MPLP can help us decide which recordings can be processed and described as groups, however, and which still merit individual attention.” Speaking more generally about minimal processing, another participant noted

I think it can create a more efficient workflow. . . the problem with detailing everything fully, not moving on to a second collection until you’ve taken care of the first, can lead to not getting anything done. And we live and die by the collections that we grow, and the strengths of our collections. To turn down, or to think we can’t handle the ingest of any materials because we haven’t fully processed what we have, I think is sort of short-sighted. I think when we do minimal processing of materials we get a good sense of what it is we’re bringing in, how it adds to the collection as a whole. And I think it allows us to be more flexible as well.

Thus, although nearly all respondents indicated unease with specific elements of MPLP, particularly how to provide intellectual control and access without item-level description, the general consensus was that practitioners were responsive to the particulars of the collections at hand and the perceived user needs.

One participant went as far as to suggest that perhaps MPLP’s ultimate impact on audiovisual collections might be less about saving time or reducing description levels, and more about A/V items benefiting from the effect of more streamlined processing of paper-based portions of collections. In their own words, “maybe the answer to that is no,



we don't necessarily save a huge amount of time by MPLPing our A/V, or you can't MPLP A/V in the same way you would other stuff, but by saving enough time on the other parts, we can actually do better work in the description." They contrasted this with older finding aids, where "somebody would go into detail, you look at old finding guides and somebody would go into detailed description of all the paper portion and then the end of the guide would be 'box 22 to 30: audiovisual materials,' because nobody knew how to deal with them." Instead, "maybe MPLP will refocus a bit of that towards less detailed description of paper and more of the resources put towards describing some of the A/V collections as well."

It was also noted by several respondents that not all sound recordings are created equal with regard to processing needs and potential shortcuts. Depending on their ultimate use, concert series, recurring radio programs, and so forth might be candidates for series-level description. It also bears establishing that by and large these responses were explicitly in the context of physical sound objects and did not address digital sound recordings because "once you start digitizing, minimal processing as an option really goes out the window."

## **1.10 Other factors & influences**

In addition to discussing their opinions on and experience with the relevance of MPLP for audiovisual archiving, participants were asked about theories, experiences, and other factors that influenced their current approach. For three respondents, MPLP played a significant role in current efforts, either due to staff training, university-wide working groups, or simply finding it an influential part of their graduate studies. For instance,

MPLP “definitely informs my goals for making things available and trying to weed through our new acquisitions and through the backlog and your collections that are partially processed or need a lot of attention.”

For the vast majority, however, practical experience, including learning from fellow archivists and peer institutions, was cited as the primary influence in how they approached processing, rather than particular theories or the professional literature. In other words, “we try to follow, or we try to at least refer to generally accepted archival theory in our work, but. . . I haven’t seen a lot of published theory that really addresses processing in the way that we do it.” Or as another participant put it, “I read some of the literature, but I don’t read everything that comes out about it.” Other factors included limitations imposed by technology – such as a time-consuming cataloging system – as well as physical space constraints, and ingest requirements imposed by off-site storage facilities.

When asked whether they had surveyed users about how they accessed their materials, all respondents indicated they felt well-attuned to their patrons through reference requests and anecdotal feedback, but only one repository had conducted a formal user assessment study, which was done in the context of a larger university-wide initiative. As one participant explained, “I think it’s really just seeing the use of the collection. Through reference requests, talking to staff in R & I, but also a lot of it is just anecdotal evidence.” This informal approach was also echoed in documentation practices, with eight out of eleven repositories surveyed lacking specific processing manuals, leading one respondent to declare “Virtually everything we do is an oral tradition.” Nonetheless, three individuals had such works in progress.

Regardless of the general lack of documentation and formal theoretical underpinnings, however, the professionals surveyed demonstrated a nuanced, critically informed, and practically-based understanding of, and interest in, the benefits and limitations of minimal processing for audiovisual collections. They acknowledged the complexity of the topic, the many local factors affecting their current practices, and the overall lack of guidelines for their niche field.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

As an exploratory study, the open-ended survey questions were designed to incite reflection and establish a preliminary snapshot of sound archivists' approach to minimal processing, their professional influences, and their assessment of the relevance of MPLP to their work. The results were revealing, if lacking a tidy take-away message. Clearly, MPLP was on these practitioners' radars, but opinions were split with regard to its applicability for sound collections, and in general practice flowed from on-the-job experience and institutional context and limitations, rather than departing from academic theories or wide-spread best practices.

Participants expressed an appreciation for the need to get collections out for users as quickly and efficiently as possible, but thoughtfully articulated concern over whether this was possible within a minimalistic framework. This apprehension appeared to be reflected in the fact that nearly half of all respondents described their institution's approach as trending towards the maximalist end of the spectrum, while acknowledging that priorities and descriptive levels were ultimately largely collection and context dependent.

If some of MPLP's tenets seemed a stretch for audiovisual processing, many of its criticisms were substantiated by the ethnographic data gathered, such as diverse holdings and extremely small staff (Van Ness, 2010, p. 137), as well as the need to "invest more time and resources in developing descriptive workflows and tools tailored to the need for efficient processing and description" (Prom, 2010, pp. 168). The repeatedly stated need for a thoughtful, and possibly more holistic, approach to MPLP for audiovisual materials likewise echoed Prom's contention that "we should not place excessive hope in any one solution, because many factors work together to determine the overall effectiveness of an archival program" (p. 169). In other words, as one participant noted, "MPLP is realizing that you don't have to process everything equally, that you really are looking at the importance of one collection versus another."

Of course, the results of this small-scale study cannot be presumed to be generalizable. Nevertheless, in light of the extremely limited evidence-based scholarship currently available, and the pressing need to ensure continued access to a wealth of audiovisual materials of enduring societal value, it is hoped that this ethnographic study has provided some useful perspectives on and from this niche archival community, its special needs, and how current practitioners are coping with processing challenges specific to audiovisual materials. If the individuals surveyed are any indication, much thought has been and continues to be put into improving access to audiovisual materials. While it remains to be seen whether MPLP – or some variant thereof – becomes a viable option for audiovisual processing, for better or for worse, minimal processing as a whole appears to be here to stay.

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## Appendix A: Question Guide

### 1.11 Part I: Warm-up

- Greeting: introduction and restatement of purpose of study (from notification email), including number of questions, duration of interview, and right of participant to opt out of individual questions and/or discontinue participation at any time.
- Do you have any questions before we get started?
- Before we proceed with the body of the interview, would you mind confirming some basic demographic details about your repository?
  - Number of employees
  - Size of collection
  - Types of media
  - When archive was established

### 1.12 Part II: Body of interview

1. Are you familiar with the term More Product, Less Process?
  - a. Do you think it's applicable to processing sound collections?
  - b. What are your thoughts in general on minimal processing?
2. How would you describe minimal processing for A/V records?
  - a. For instance, does this still mean item-level description?
3. How would you describe your current processing workflow?
  - a. Where do you think it falls along the spectrum, from minimal to maximal?
  - b. Has this changed over time? If so, how?
4. What disciplines, theories or other influences have informed your current processing practice?
  - a. Have you talked to users about how they access your materials?
  - b. How and where would you cut back if you had to?
  - c. What would you spend more resources on, given the opportunity?
5. Would you be willing to share any workflow documentation, such as processing manuals?

### 1.13 Part III: Cool off and closure

- Reiterate purpose of study, how responses will be used (anonymized), and timeline for completion.
- Thank participant for time and ask if s/he would be willing to respond to follow up questions once data has been collected and is being analyzed.

## Appendix B: Email Solicitations

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### 1.14 INDIVIDUAL EMAIL SOLICITATION (VERSION A)

To: [Selected participants]

Subject: Survey on minimal processing and sound archives

Dear [Participant],

I am a master's student at the University of North Carolina's School of Information and Library Science specializing in archives and records management, with special interest in music librarianship. I am writing to solicit your assistance in completing my capstone master's paper, which examines how sound archives approach minimal processing for their holdings.

As one of up to twelve possible respondents, I respectfully request your participation in a brief phone survey consisting of 6-10 questions and lasting approximately 30 minutes. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, but no identifying information will be included in the final report.

The research questions underlying my exploratory study are as follows:

- What has been the impact and/or application of the “More Product Less Process” model on the processes used by audiovisual archivists?
- What does minimal processing look like for sound recordings versus paper-based archives?
- How satisfied are audiovisual archivists with their current processing workflow?

In collecting and analyzing interview data, I hope to provide trends and approaches that will benefit the sound archives community in working towards increased collaboration with regard to minimal processing.

Participation in this study is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time. Every effort will be made to ensure that response information included in the final report does not include items that might serve to identify participating individuals and/or institutions. This proposed study has been reviewed by the UNC Behavioral IRB (IRB Study No. 12-1063) and was determined to be exempt from further review (Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation).

If you wish to participate, please indicate so via email or phone at your earliest convenience. A follow-up email and/or phone call will be issued within 5 days of this initial announcement. If you do not wish to be contacted further regarding this study, please reply via either method indicated above, by [date].

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.



Sincerely,

Sofía Becerra-Licha, MSLS Candidate '12

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Manuscripts Processing Coordinator, Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-CH  
Adjunct Instructor, School of Information and Library Science, UNC-CH

## 1.15 INDIVIDUAL EMAIL SOLICITATION (VERSION B)

To: [Selected participants]

Subject: Survey on minimal processing and sound archives

Dear [Participant],

I am a master's student at the University of North Carolina's School of Information and Library Science specializing in archives and records management, with special interest in music librarianship. I am writing to solicit your assistance in completing my capstone master's paper, which examines how sound archives approach minimal processing for their holdings.

As one of up to twelve possible respondents, your inclusion was recommended to me by [individual] and I respectfully request your participation in a brief phone survey consisting of 6-10 questions and lasting approximately 30 minutes. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, but no identifying information will be included in the final report.

The research questions underlying my exploratory study are as follows:

- What has been the impact and/or application of the "More Product Less Process" model on the processes used by audiovisual archivists?
- What does minimal processing look like for sound recordings versus paper-based archives?
- How satisfied are audiovisual archivists with their current processing workflow?

In collecting and analyzing interview data, I hope to provide trends and approaches that will benefit the sound archives community in working towards increased collaboration with regard to minimal processing.

Participation in this study is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time. Every effort will be made to ensure that response information included in the final report does not include items that might serve to identify participating individuals and/or institutions. This proposed study has been reviewed by the UNC Behavioral IRB (IRB Study No. 12-1063) and was determined to be exempt from further review (Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation).

If you wish to participate, please indicate so via email or phone at your earliest convenience. A follow-up email and/or phone call will be issued within 5 days of this initial announcement. If you do not wish to be contacted further regarding this study, please reply via either method indicated above, by [date].

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

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## Appendix C: Question Guide for Participants

IRB Study # 12-1063

Title of Study: A Survey of Minimal Processing Practices and Standards for Sound Recordings

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### Interview Guide

#### 1.16 Part I: Warm-up/demographic info:

- Number of employees
- Size of collection
- Types of media
- When archive was established
- Respondent's title

#### 1.17 Part II: Interview

1. Are you familiar with the term More Product, Less Process?
  - a. Do you think it's applicable to processing sound collections?
  - b. What are your thoughts in general on minimal processing?
2. How would you describe minimal processing for A/V records?
3. How would you describe your current processing workflow?
  - a. Where do you think it falls along the spectrum, from minimal to maximal?
  - b. Has this changed over time? If so, how?
4. What disciplines, theories or other influences have informed your current processing practice?
  - a. Have you talked to users about how they access your materials?
  - b. How and where would you cut back if you had to? What would you spend more resources on, given the opportunity?
5. Would you be willing to share any workflow documentation, such as processing manuals?

NOTE: Interviews are expected to last no longer than 30 minutes. Participation in this study is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, but every effort will be made to ensure that response information included in

the final report does not include items that might serve to identify participating individuals and/or institutions. This proposed study has been reviewed by the UNC Behavioral IRB (IRB Study No. 12-1063) and was determined to be exempt from further review (Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation).